

## U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Alligator River/Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge  
P. O. Box 1969  
Manteo, North Carolina 27954

Contact: Bonnie Strawser - 252-473-1131



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## News Release

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### Fire Danger is High; Residents and Visitors Advised to Be Cautious



Photo credit: FWS, Donnie Harris

US Fish and Wildlife Service Fire Management Equipment Operators Eric Meekins and Amy Midgette stand by the wildfire severity helicopter brought in on high fire danger days during the unprecedented drought period we are experiencing. Eric and Amy are among fire staff at Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge who are cross-trained in aviation management to assist the helicopter pilot in deploying to fight wildland fires.



Photo credit: FWS, Tom Crews

South Koehring Wildfire at Alligator River NWR, March 2007. To report a wildfire, call 911, give the location and description of the fire and note if anyone is present or not.

District Fire Management Officer Tom Crews announced today that fire danger in eastern North Carolina is extremely high and cautions all residents and visitors to be aware of the hazards and watchful for wildfires. Crews explained, "The US Fish and Wildlife Service, National Park Service and North Carolina Forest Service are working together to respond to the increased risk of wildland fires on areas including the Dare County Mainland and Washington, Tyrrell and Hyde Counties. We have increased levels of staffing on the days when weather conditions create a higher risk of wildland fires. The NC Forest Service has issued a State-wide burning ban to reduce the risk of human-caused fires." The current drought trend is expected to last on through the winter and into next spring. Crews added, "We really need the public to report any suspected wildfires. We are not planning any prescribed burning until the burn ban is lifted and we have had significant rainfall." To report a wildfire, individuals should call 911, give the location and description of the fire and note if anyone is present.

The current fire danger is a result of drought conditions in eastern North Carolina and other parts of the country. Crews explained, "We are 10 or more inches behind in rainfall for the year in most locations in Eastern North Carolina. Many other locations in NC are behind 15-20 inches."

In general, wildland fires occur in eastern North Carolina throughout the year. The drier and windier

conditions experienced this fall have caused higher than normal fire danger. The peat soils of the Dare County Mainland and surrounding counties are extremely vulnerable to the drying effects of the drought, especially in areas that have been ditched and drained. These severely dried soils are extremely susceptible to fire and are damaged, sometimes beyond repair. For example, the Allen Road Fire in the spring of 1985 consumed as much as three feet of peat soil in many locations in Hyde and Washington Counties.

To prepare for managing wildfires, the US Fish and Wildlife Service brings in a helicopter for the higher fire danger periods. The helicopter has a 180 gallon bucket that can be used to attack any new wildfire quickly, trying to keep it small until tractors can be brought in for suppression. The helicopter, along with the NC Forest Service and NPS aircraft, is also being used to maintain a lookout for fires. Crews said, "The strategy behind beefing up the fire response capabilities of these agencies is to try and stop a wildland fire quickly before it becomes entrenched in the woodlands and becomes more difficult to control."

Crews further stated, "I know we confuse a lot of folks with prescribed burning. It may look like we light fires one day and try to put out fires the next. And, sometimes, that's really what we're doing. But, there is solid science behind our fire program. Before we light a match, the conditions have to be darn near perfect."

"But, the current fire danger is extreme. Wildfire control tactics that normally are highly successful, may be much less effective under the current dry conditions. This is especially true in peat soils, in which a quick response becomes much more important than ever before. "

So, what can you do to help? Crews advises, "The public is particularly asked to be extremely cautious with the use of fire, smokes and especially to obey the burn ban and laws banning the use of fireworks."